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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 003365

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TAGS: [KPAL](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [SY](#) [IS](#)

SUBJECT: HAMAS EXILED LEADER HOLDS DAMASCUS PRESS CONFERENCE

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Stephen A. Seche for reasons 1.4 b/d

¶1. (U) Summary: The leader of Hamas' external political wing, Khalid Mish'al, held a lengthy press conference July 10 at a Damascus hotel, covering the rejection of U.S. and Israeli demands to release a kidnapped Israel soldier, ongoing international dialogue with Hamas, and Syrian support for Palestinians. He asserted that Gilad Shalit would only be released in exchange for Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails. Mish'al spoke clearly and confidently for more than 50 minutes, glancing only occasionally at notes, and then took questions from the local and regional media representatives. The press conference occurred just hours after a short-lived, SARG-orchestrated protest on behalf of the Palestinians in the Syrian capital. It also coincided with the July 9 arrival of two envoys from Palestinian Authority (PA) President Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) and the separate arrival of Arab League SYG Amr Moussa. End Summary.

¶2. (U) The Damascus-based Hamas leader, Khalid Mish'al, held an 80-minute press conference July 10 at the Four Seasons Hotel, speaking combatively for more than 50 minutes followed by a question-and-answer session with local and regional media representatives. His comments covered the rejection of U.S. and Israeli demands to release a kidnapped Israel soldier, Syrian support for Palestinians, and ongoing international dialogue with Hamas. Sitting to Mish'al's right during the conference was aide Mohammed Nazal, who later apologized to journalists for tight security and a requirement that they be bused from a meeting place to the hotel.

¶3. (U) ON THE KIDNAPPED SOLDIER: Mish'al called Gilad Shalit "a prisoner of war," adding that "international conventions and laws should be applied to his case." Decision-making authority for the soldier's fate rested with the Hamas leadership inside the Territories, said Mish'al, adding, however, that Shalit would only be released in exchange for Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails. Eighty percent of Palestinians polled on the matter reject Gilad Shalit's unconditional release, said Mish'al, asserting that the U.S. and Israel have put the fate of the soldier at the top of their agenda, despite having ignored for decades the mistreatment of Palestinian families. The Hamas leader said he had met and discussed the soldier's fate with (unnamed) European envoys, as well as the Turkish PM's envoy, Ahmet Davutoglu, who visited Damascus on July 6. In response to a question, Mish'al said he would meet with Arab League SYG Amr Moussa, who arrived July 9 in Damascus and was also expected to meet Syrian President Bashar al-Asad. Israel supports ongoing diplomatic efforts with Hamas "to buy time" while it gathers information on Shalit's location, Mish'al insisted.

¶4. (U) ON SYRIA'S ROLE: Mish'al expressed gratitude for SARG unconditional support to the Palestinian cause and claimed, in response to a reporter's question, that Damascus sought nothing in exchange. The U.S. and Israel were accusing the SARG of involvement in the soldier's capture out of frustration over Syria's steadfast support for the Palestinians and other just causes, Mish'al asserted. "Any problem in the world will be blamed on Syria," claimed the Palestinian leader, noting that in the past when Hamas was based in Jordan and mounted attacks against Israel, the U.S. had singled out the Palestinian group directly and spared its diplomatic ally. (Note: Mish'al's press conference came just hours after a 20-minute SARG-orchestrated protest in Damascus on behalf of the Palestinian cause. Up to 4,000 protesters attended the event, carrying signs in English and Arabic, as well as pictures of Syrian President Asad.) Mish'al said that while the U.S. claims it is fighting terrorism, "it is pouring oil" on regional conflicts.

¶5. (U) Mish'al expressed pride in the determination of Palestinians inside and outside the Occupied Territories, saying that they were like people after a natural disaster who either "submitted" or survived. He talked about past Palestinian leaders, including former Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) Chairman Yasser Arafat, and said that even if Israel carried out its threats to kill him, it wouldn't matter because he was just one of many in the service of the Palestinian people. Mish'al directed some of his comments to Israelis noting that "your leaders are lying to you" and "leading you to destruction." He also advised officials in the USG, as well as U.S. citizens, to stop their "Administration's adventures."

¶6. (U) In response to questions from the press corps,

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Mish'al said he had no information about the July 9 arrival of PA envoys, Taysir Khaled, who is a member of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine and the PLO's Executive Committee, and Abdullah Hourani, a widely-respected former PLO official. When asked if there had been recent communication between Hamas and Hizballah, Mish'al responded that there was "continuous communication" between all of the "Palestinian resistance" in and out of the Territories. When asked whether Palestinian operations would refrain from targeting Israeli citizens, Mish'al said that those choices rested with the people responsible for military decision-making.

¶7. (U) Mish'al's last public appearance occurred in early June after an announced meeting with Syrian FM Walid Mu'allim. He and other exiled Hamas leaders went underground following the Shalit capture after Israel announced that they could be targeted even in Damascus. Press reports recently speculated that Mish'al had left Syria for Algeria, but Hamas officials, on the eve of the Mish'al press conference, publicly denied those claims.

¶8. (C) Comment: Today's press conference seemed designed to showcase for an attentive international audience the unwavering support of the Syrian regime for Hamas in general and Mish'al in particular, even in the face of substantial international pressure on the SARG to distance itself from both. Even the venue for the event--the tony Four Seasons Hotel--seemed to have been chosen to convey disdain for Israeli threats to assassinate Hamas leadership in Damascus, and to reinforce the message that all Syrian resources remain at Hamas disposal. It seems likely that the SARG will use the coincidence of Amr Moussa's arrival in Damascus, and that of the PA delegation, to remind interested parties of its indispensable role in resolving both the current crisis in Gaza, and the larger questions of regional stability.

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